

Number one for English language teachers



## First steps into ... The 'Four Cs'

By Daniel Barber, Brian Bennet

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Communication, creativity, collaboration and critical thinking. Daniel Barber introduces the 'super skills' that 21st century students can't do without.



## The 'Four Cs'

Are the skills students need to learn today the same as they've always been? Fifty years ago literacy and numeracy made up education's core skills. They were commonly known as 'the three Rs' (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic). It is widely acknowledged that these basic skills are not enough to succeed in the 21st century, which presents education, and the world, with unique demands.

Think about it

Read the following statements about recent changes in society. What skills do you think are necessary in the 21st century?

- We live in a globalized society, one where most of the population is connected geographically, economically and politically.
- Society is 'hyperconnected' by the digital media.
- Together we face some of the biggest problems we have ever experienced, such as the threat of climate change.
- Society and technology are changing faster than at any other time in history.

What are the 'Four Cs'?

Communication. Creativity. Collaboration. Critical thinking. These are the four 'super skills' that the [National Education Association](#) – the United States' largest teachers' organization, and founding partners of the [Partnership for 21st Century Learning](#) movement – identified as key skills that citizens of the 21st century could not do without:

*Life today is ... more complicated ... than it was 50 years ago ... With a host of challenges ... along with instant connectivity to a global society, civic literacy couldn't be more relevant ... in our schools. Global warming, immigration reform, pandemic diseases, and financial meltdowns ... today's students must be prepared to solve these challenges. In addition, workforce skills and demands have changed dramatically in the last 20 years ... There has been a rapid increase in jobs involving non-routine, analytic, and interactive communication skills. Today's job market requires ... critical thinking and the ability to interact with people from many linguistic and cultural backgrounds.*

– An Educator's Guide to the 'Four Cs'

The 'Four Cs' are broad sets of skills which are easier to understand when broken down into their subskills:

### **Communication**

This includes the abilities to:

- articulate your ideas effectively in spoken, written and nonverbal forms in a variety of contexts.
- listen effectively, to understand meaning, attitudes and intentions.
- communicate effectively in multilingual and multicultural environments.

### **Creativity**

Being creative includes sub skills such as being able to:

- create valuable, innovative ideas.
- demonstrate originality in work while being realistic about the limits of new ideas.
- act on creative ideas to make tangible and useful contributions.
- adapt and re-share materials with your networks.

### **Critical thinking**

Thinking critically involves, among other things:

- using appropriate types of reasoning for each situation.
- analysing and evaluating evidence, arguments, claims and beliefs.
- asking significant questions that clarify various points of view and lead to better solutions.

### **Collaboration**

This includes such sub skills as being able to:

- work effectively and respectfully with diverse teams.
- show flexibility and willingness to be helpful to accomplish common goals.
- make compromises, as necessary.
- assume shared responsibility for collaborative work and value contributions made by others.

While it is important to emphasize each skill, it can be difficult in practice to separate them from each other. For example, creativity today requires adaptability and teamwork, so good communication and collaboration skills are necessary. High-order thinking is both critical and creative, generating and evaluating ideas at the

same time.

## To think about – the 'Four Cs' in ELT

The objectives of the 'Four Cs' should be a priority in all areas of education. The good news is that language learning has a head start in promoting communicative goals; ELT is primarily concerned with facilitating **communication** across national and cultural boundaries. What's more, recent ideas in our sector about the importance of communicative competence and the role of English as a lingua franca strengthen our claims to be leaders in this 21st-century skill. English is no longer the domain of native speakers, but is a truly inclusive language for global understanding.

**Collaboration**, too, has had a significant role in our sector for many years. Teachers and students understand the importance of group work to facilitate learning; project work, team game playing and discussion are common elements in the English classroom. By promoting these qualities in class, we are promoting their importance in the real world.

One way that **critical thinking** skills are already practised in ELT is in higher level comprehension tasks, in which students are required to understand not just what was said but why. Teachers need to encourage deeper levels of understanding, by asking such questions as: *How does the speaker support his point of view? How persuasive was the speaker's argument? What is the writer's intention in this blog post? How reliable is this news website?* It is also necessary for learners to evaluate their own learning critically as they learn more independently: *What did I learn from this material? Is this a good use of my time? How useful is this activity to me? How can I tell?*

**Creativity** is harder to identify as an essential ingredient in ELT. Our students are learning a foreign language, which means following the rules of grammar and lexis. Could being 'creative' in the language class be another way of saying the student is using non-standard English – being wrong, in other words? Perhaps we don't want to encourage creative thinking in the language classroom. Shouldn't we leave that to the literature and engineering courses?

There is no easy answer to this question. While creativity may help learners take ownership of the language, through playful manipulation of grammar and vocabulary, as teachers we need to discourage students from deviating from the norms of English usage. A lexical approach to language learning demands that we teach not what combinations are *possible* grammatically but what collocations are *likely* in normal speech. Having said that, many activities that practise English do require creativity: story writing, role-plays and drama, for example. Another area where creativity is a strength is in dealing with gaps in knowledge. A common experience in language learning is the need to express ideas that go beyond learners' current abilities, such as when they don't know the word. In these situations, they must find novel ways to express themselves. Here, a creative, even 'risky' attitude to linguistic expression becomes an essential survival technique and should be encouraged and praised in the classroom.

One teaching environment where we may see creativity promoted is in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) settings, where English is used as the language of instruction in subjects such as science and geography. Imagine, for example, a science project to build a bridge out of paper, where English is the class language. Innovation and creativity are being tested while the students' language of collaboration is English.

## Conclusion

The goal of 'preparing students for a global society' may seem extremely ambitious and very distant from the modest linguistic aims of our classes, but there is no reason why English language teachers cannot take a key role in this drive. As teachers of a truly global language, we are ideally placed to lead the way in teaching the 'Four Cs'.

Think about your lessons and how they are already promoting the 'Four Cs'. What more can you do to prepare your students for the 21st century?

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